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ABSTRACT

School board members usually have great power but little training. The literature supports the need for orientation and inservice training. A survey of a random sample of newly elected board members and superintendents in Illinois revealed a difference between the two groups in perception of training. Apparently superintendents believe that more training is taking place than board members are aware of. This difference of perception could be caused by lack of a common definition of training. Respondents identified types of training available and specified which types are most valuable. Training during board meetings is especially lacking, even though such training is vital. Ideas are listed for school board training, and written board policies concerning orientation and training of board members are recommended. A brief list of references concludes the paper. (FWR)

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Are We Paying Lip Service To Training New School Board Members?

by

R.E. Everett and Charles A. Sloan

1984

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Some people are questioning whether school boards, as we presently know them, can or should continue to exist. If lay boards are to survive, one of the keys to that survival will be the improvement of their effectiveness. We believe that these improvements are within the capabilities and actions of the individual board members working together effectively as a policy making body.

It remains a fact that school board members are (1) lay people, (2) generally the least trained people in the school system regarding the learning and education of children, and (3) hold the most power. These facts are embedded in today's educational environment which is much more complex and varied today than when local school boards were first established. School board members need to be assisted in coming to an understanding of their duties, responsibilities and limits. They especially need help in understanding their role and their relationship to the total school board, their executive officers and administrative team. If this does not occur, the public educational process is likely to experience difficulties in governance and operational effectiveness. More importantly, two serious side-effects, poor educational opportunities for children and a lack of public confidence in schools, will certainly occur.

The literature on this topic clearly supports the need for two types of carefully planned training: (1) orientation programs for the beginning board member, and (2) systematic, comprehensive and sophisticated continued

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inservice education for all school board members. We believe that a rationale for thorough orientation and training must be firmly established! The major focus of this article is toward that end.

In the July, 1970 issue of The American School Board Journal, John Francois reported the results of a survey of 45 school districts board member orientation and training practices. The main finding was that a majority of new school board members had not been trained to assume their duties. The all too familiar approach, according to Francois, was "Hand them the board policy manual, a copy of school regulations, maybe minutes from past board meetings - and be certain to include wishes for good luck in their new positions."

The work cited above motivated the authors to conduct a similar survey. In the spring of 1982, just six months after approximately 1500 new school board members had been elected to school boards in Illinois (Illinois has 1009 school districts with 7 member boards) a questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of 441 of these newly elected board members and 176 superintendents. Approximately 28% of the board member and 44% of the superintendent surveys were returned. This survey was designed to accomplish the following tasks: (1) to provide information that would allow at least rough comparison with the work done twelve years earlier, (2) to describe the current "state-of-the-art" in orienting and training school board members, and (3) to compare selected perceptions of board members to those of superintendents on the topic of orientation and training.

At the outset, a brief profile of the respondents is presented: A) 82% were male and 18% female, B) 78% were between the ages of 31-50 (94% were in the 31-60 age range), C) 35% were from elementary (K-8) districts; 15% were from high school districts (9-12); and 50% were from unit districts (K-12),

and D) 9% characterized their districts as urban, 38% as suburban and 53% as rural. It should be noted that the authors compared the responses with the variables of district enrollment, budget size and district type but found no major differences.

The first survey question was, "Does your board of education conduct an organized and systematic orientation and training program for newly elected school board members?" To this question only 17% of the board members answered "yes," 80% answered "no" and 3% were uncertain. However, 40% of the superintendents reported school board member training programs. It is interesting to note the difference between the respondent groups. It could be that the difference is a matter of definition. Perhaps this response suggests that if training is taking place, board members are not recognizing it as such. The previous study by Francois contained a similar question: "Does your district have an orientation program for new school board members?" He received responses of 69% yes, 9% no and 12% answered "an informal one." (Total is less than 100% because not all persons responded to every question.)

In the Illinois survey, question number 2 was: "Does your board have a written policy concerning the orientation and training of new school board members?" Only 10% of the board members reported in the affirmative. Seventy-six percent reported no policy while 14% were uncertain. The responses from superintendents were similar - 14% "yes" and 86% "no." The Francois survey did not contain a comparable question. The comparison that seems significant is that 40% of the "training" reported in the first question by superintendents is not supported by policy. This may not be a big surprise when one stops to think about the wide variety of other activities that occur without the benefit, protection of direction of board policy.

The 1982 survey attempted to identify when the orientation and training began for new board members. It was fourd that 20% of the board members reported some form of specialized training starting prior to their election and 30% reported some orientation before their first board meeting. The later was defined as occurring between election day and the organizational meeting of the board, which in Illinois must be held within seven days of the election. More than one half (63%) reported that their orientation and training had taken place after their first school board meeting. On the same subject, the superintendents responded that they had performed some orientation for school board candidates before the election. The majority (64%) of the superintendents reported some contact with newly elected board members before their first school board meeting and 90% indicated that some training seminars had taken place after election day. Again, the differences between the two groups might indicate that the board members did not realize (or remember) that they were receiving orientation and training. It seems that, what appears to be training in the eyes of the superintendents is not viewed in the same light by board members! This is not a judgment about the quality, but it certainly suggests a real concern about the communication of orientation and training experiences to school board members. When Francois asked the question "When does the new board member receive his orientation?" 18% reported "before taking office" and 45% "after taking office" (once again not all respondents answered this question).

Another aspect explored by the Illinois survey was to categorize the types of training activities currently in use. The four general types found were: (1) visiting district schools and facilities, (2) training workshops provided by Illinois Association of School Boards, (3) conferences with staff/board members, and (4) the receipt and review of selected district reports and

documents. From the Illinois study 54% reported holding conferences with the superintendent, 21% with other board members, 20% with the board president. and 17% with other administrators or staff members. Ninety percent of the superintendents stated that they held conferences with new board members for the purpose of orientation and training. In the area of visiting district facilities only 32% of the new board members reported such visits. Also, the majority (64%) reported receiving some IASB training. From the earlier Francois study, 30% reported a private conference with the superintendent, 0% with the board president alone, and 45% with both the superintendent and board president. Forty-two percent reported visiting school buildings and the district office with the superintendent. Twenty-four percent reported such visitations were conducted with other board members or administrators.

The documents provided to school board members reported were:

95% received a district policy manual (38% before their first meeting)
54% received minutes of past board meetings (30% prior to the first meeting)
72% got copies of Financial Audits (17% before the first meeting)
71% got the Illinois School Code
98% received some materials from about IASB
57% got materials related to negotiations and/or the employee contracts (43% had not received information about the bargaining process of previous outcomes)
40% had copies of the superintendent's present contract
61% reported getting "other" types of reading materials

When asked to rate the usefulness of the above mentioned materials, all received more than a majority responding as useful (77% rated board minutes helpful). From the work reported by Francois the reading materials used in orientation programs for new board members were: 69% school board policy guide, 52% minutes of board meetings, 60% school regulations, and 45% other (literature from school board association and commercial sources; board reports; curriculum and budgetary materials; state codes; seminars; group sessions).

Illinois school board members identified 22 different training session topics which they had experienced. The five most commonly mentioned were: 1) role of board members (58%), 2) school finance (54%), 3) board meeting mechanics (52%), 4) policy development (46%), and 5) school law (42%).

When asked to identify the most valuable training received, the topics most often mentioned were: (1) IASB new member training sessions, (2) IASB convention, (3) attendance at board meetings, (4) other board members, (5) conferences with superintendents, and (6) IASB materials.

Of the 52 separate ideas that were listed, only 2 were rated by the respondents as "least useful", they were curriculum studies and budget analyses.

New school board members listed "How to be a board member" at the top of the list for training experiences. This item was followed in order of frequency by: school finance, orientation to total district, the board member's role in policy development and curriculum analysis.

If one thing stands our from the data collected, it is in connection with training as a regular part of regular board meetings! When asked, "Is a part of every regular board meeting set aside for training board members?" only 3% of the school board members said "yes" while 2% of the superintendents responded "yes." This means that the training that is going on is taking place outside of board meetings. The question to be asked in this regard is "Why?" We believe some training should and does occur at every school board meeting.

Many ideas have been suggested for school board training. The following are not new or even an all inclusive list of ideas offered by others but represent a suggested starting point. The last item is the most important.

1. Remember there is no one best way.
2. Determine your own training needs.
3. Space the training over time - make the training continuous.
4. Make each training session appropriate to the current issues and problems being faced by the board.
5. Carefully plan each session.
6. See that all board members are trained.
7. Involve staff and board members in the training.
8. Establish open communication.
9. Define what the training roles will be and who will be assigned to carry out each role.
10. Adopt a policy that covers each of the above items 1-9. We told you this was the most important.

Summary

School boards play a significant role in determining the quality of educational service delivered in a community. The soundness of their action is critical! Because of the increasing complexities, expectations and problems of today and tomorrow, sound decision-making has become itself increasingly difficult. School board members need more knowledge on more subjects. Moreover, these persons, in order to be effective school board members, need intensive orientation, training and inservice growth opportunities throughout their term(s) on the board!

New board members from all types and sizes of school districts sense a need for increased orientation and training opportunities. Their superintendents heartily agree, yet little is being done in any organized fashion! Greater investments of time, effort and money must be considered. We suggest that district resources be used under a written board policy concerning the orientation and training of new board members. If local control of the public schools is to be enhanced to the point that local control can be assured, informed and effective participants are needed. This study has convinced us, one more time, that school board orientation and training is in need of serious revision and reconsideration.

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